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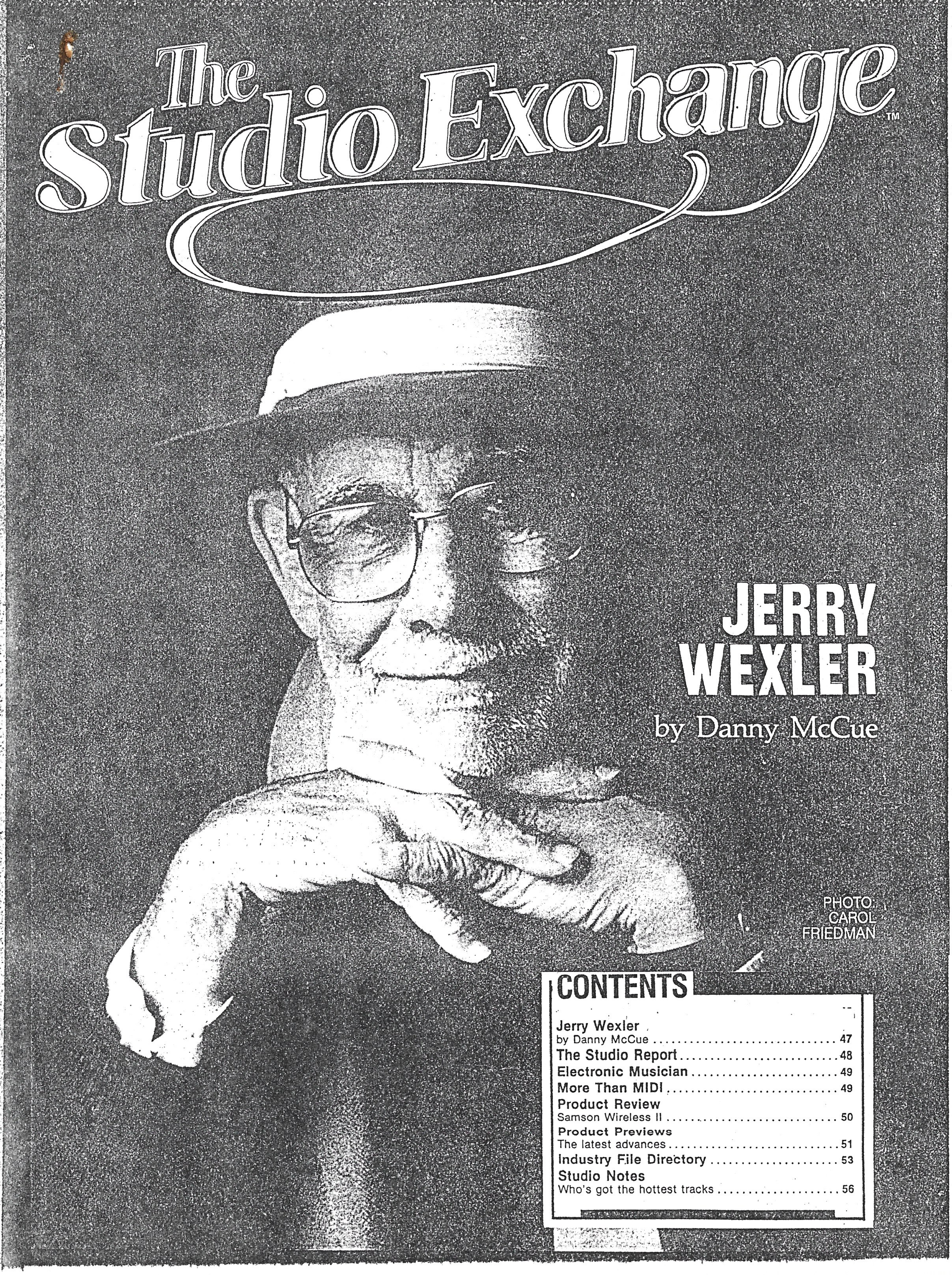

JERRY WEXLER

by Danny McCue

PHOTO: CAROL FRIEDMAN

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JERRY WEXLER

He Ain't Braggin'

by Danny McCue

Until the day that he joined Atlantic Records in the early fifties, Jerry Wexler had little experience in making records, let alone hit records. His only substantial music business experience up to that point had come in the guise of covering the music beat for Billboard *magazine. But he had always loved the blues, was an avid record collector and had been instrumental in having the Race Music charts renamed Rhythm And Blues. On the night of his first day on the job at Atlantic he ran his first session. The artist was Clyde McPhatter.*

In those days, sessions were held in the office shared by Wexler and company founder Ahmet Ertegun. They'd put one desk on top of another, set up the microphones and a few lawn chairs, and that was their studio. From such an inauspicious setting, Wexler went on to produce some of the greatest black stars of the 1950s.

In short order he emerged as the premiere producer of that hybrid of R&B called soul, producing a string of hits by such artists as Ruth Brown, Solomon Burke, Joe Tex, Ray Charles, Wilson Pickett and, of course, the legendary, ground-breaking recordings of Aretha Franklin.

The hallmark of Wexler's production style was the way in which he nurtured the artists he worked with, listening not only to what they said, but to what they thought. Most of the people who were around at the time recall a deep-seated mutual respect between Wexler and the musicians he worked with in the studio.

In later years, he was instrumental in the signings of the B-52s and Gang Of Four to Warner Brothers, and he dabbled successfully in work for both film and the stage (he received an Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Score for Louis Malles' Pretty Baby *and co-produced the Off-Broadway hit* One Mo' Time*). Throughout it all, however, one thing has remained constant — his love for what he refers to as the "holy trinity": blues, gospel and jazz.*

THE MUSIC PAPER: *Now, you weren't a founder of Atlantic Records; they had already been around a while when you came aboard. . .*

JERRY WEXLER: Exactly, I came in in 1953.

TMP: *What did you learn from Ahmet Ertegen?*

WEXLER: Oh, a great deal. Let me put it this way: There was no state-of-the-art in production at that point, so what I picked up from Ahmet were the rudiments, the technical part — tracking, layering, setting up the microphones — because that was all there was at the time. What we were able to learn, we learned strictly from actually recording people like Ray Charles.

When it came to recording, we had two jobs: To nurture what was going on out there in the room on the other side of the glass and to catch that on tape. Now that second one is really an engineering function, having to do with fidelity and microphones, seeing that there is no tape hiss to interfere with the sound. Much of that was handled by Tom Dowd. I never got very good at that. I mean, I'm not a hands-on person on the board to this day. But I didn't have to be because I had Tom Dowd. My emphasis and focus was on seeing if I could help it happen out in the studio.

TMP: *I read somewhere that in trying to illustrate a particular rhythm pattern, you went in and danced that pattern in front of the musicians in the Stax rhythm section. . .*

WEXLER: Oh yeah, right. You have to be able to change the music when it's required. That takes nerve, that takes imagination and it takes confidence because you've got the best musicians in the world out there playing on the session for scale and you're going out there and you're saying change this, make it faster or slower, change the accent. I mean, when you sing a little bass line to Ron Carter you better have it together! That's what it's all about.

The other side of that, quite frankly, is that we owned the company. We signed the checks. *(Laughs)* But that still doesn't cut it with musicians; you have to win that confidence from them so that when you tell them something, they should take it very seriously and ponder and deliberate.

TMP: *One of the first people you produced was LaVern Baker, one of the more well known victims of the 'cover system.' How did you strive to combat that?*

WEXLER: One way to combat it was to make sure we had the copyright so, at the very least, we could be guaranteed a royalty from the cover artist.

I don't think we could fight the system. The most you could do was rave and rant. It was an absolutely racist system in which we had one simple, irrefutable difficulty, and that was that white radio stations wouldn't play our black records. Now from a historic perspective, people today say, 'Oh man, I used to love those LaVern Baker records.' That's a damned lie because they didn't buy them. Something like ninety percent of the people who bought those records were black, except for highly evolved blues and jazz fans and record collectors, and that was not enough to sustain them. Society had to become educated to this music and it was educated by some British boys with long hair.

What we are dealing with is a constituency of basically insentient squares. That's our record market. And the evolved few, as is always going to be the case, are the keepers of the flame.

TMP: *You've worked with people that you could actually apply the word genius to. . .*

WEXLER: Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin, those are the two. . .and maybe Bob Dylan.

TMP: *When you work with a Ray Charles, do you find that it's possible for that person to have too many good ideas, ideas that would only appeal to the rarefied group you mentioned earlier? Do you have to play the role of the limiting factor?*

WEXLER: No, absolutely not, because part of Ray Charles' genius is the editing factor. Self editing. In fact, the editing and elimination of the superfluous is one of his great hallmarks. You know when somebody is singing the blues with an accompaniment, the greatest accompaniment stays out of the way. And who better to fill that role than yourself? So that is the foundation of everything Ray Charles did with us.

It's an article of faith not to have too much going on and have conflicting lines going against each other. This is going to get a little technical. You sit down with the harmonic structure of the song after it's written out in chords, chord changes, so you can jump from one chord to another. In the early days that was maybe all that people did when backing up, say, Elvis Presley. You didn't do all that much except lay down the harmonic substructure. But music required rhythm patterns and texturing. The texture is what nourished you; the high and low ends of the spectrum and what's in the middle.

The obverse of all this is Phil Spector's wall of sound. Now that was another way

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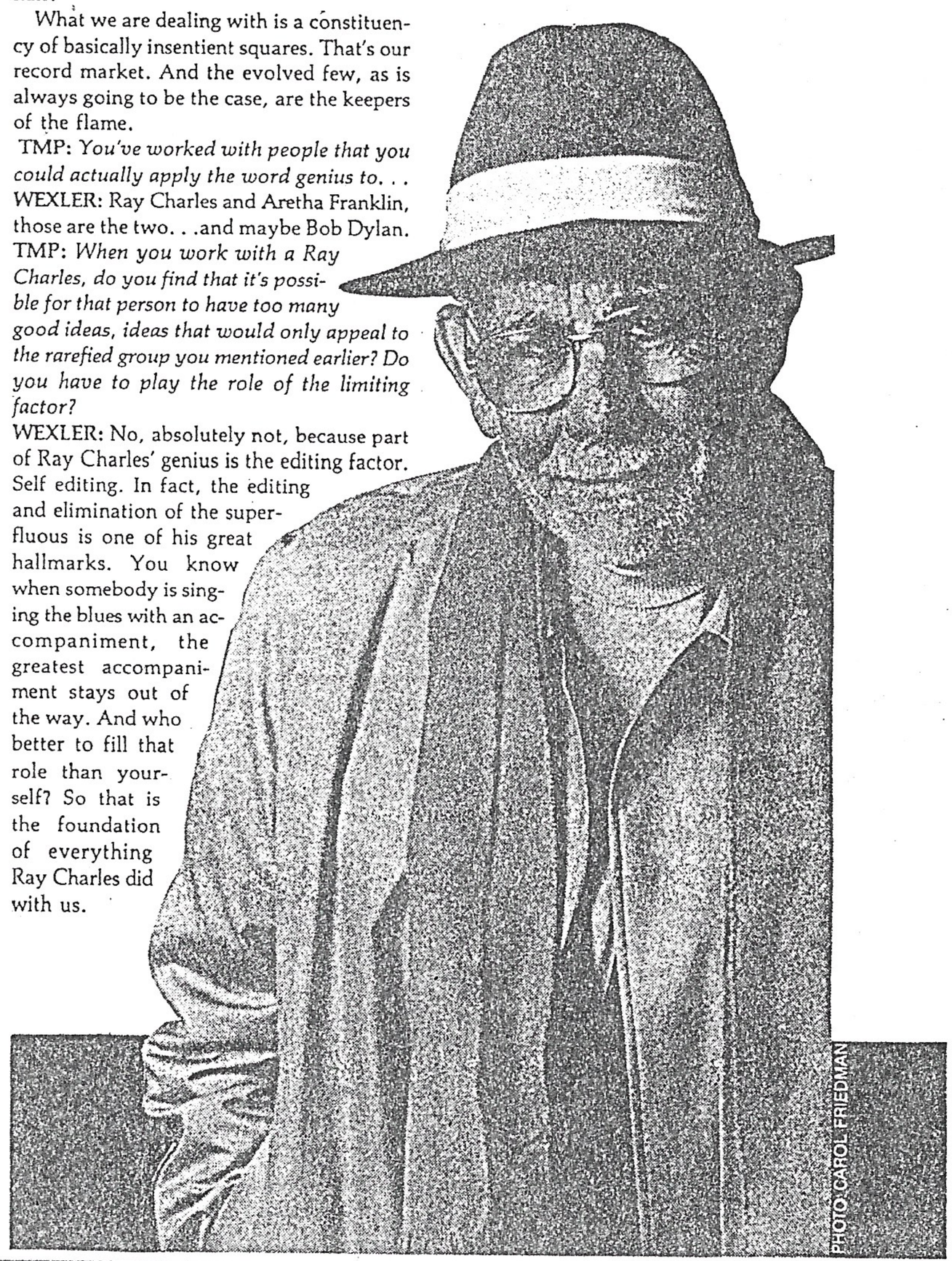

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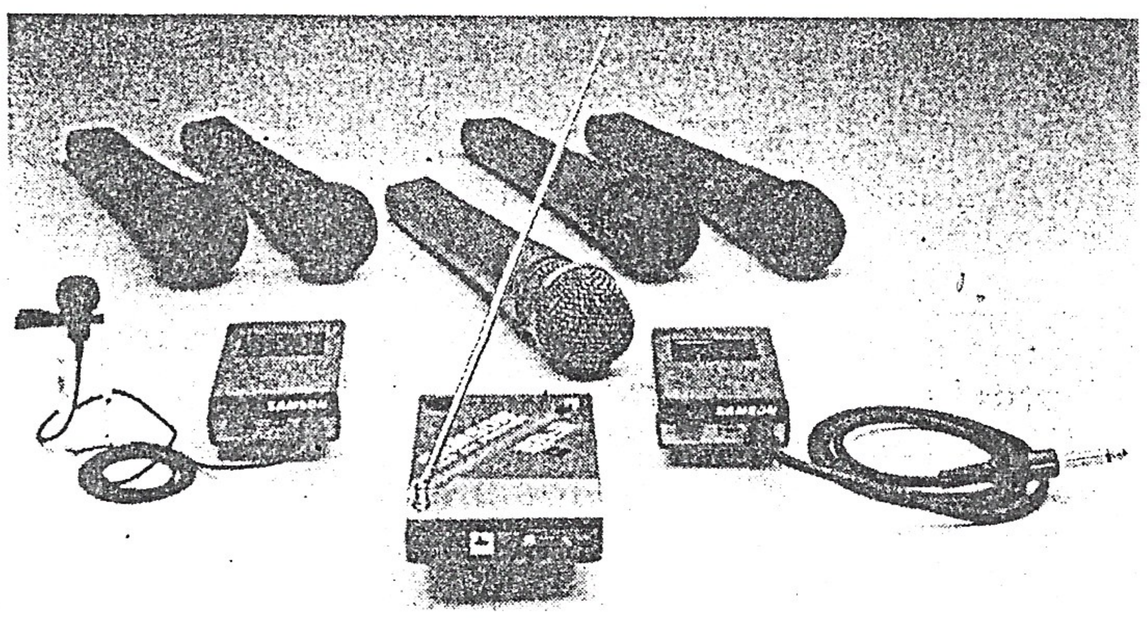
PRODUCT REVIEW

Samson Stage II Wireless - Affordable Freedom

by Martin Phillips



The very first question I had regarding the Samson Stage II Wireless System was whether or not it would reproduce the sound of an instrument at a fair distance without disturbance. My second question was whether or not it was possible for Samson to produce a quality product at such an affordable price. The answer to both questions is 'Yes.'

Of course, I took the unit into the field for a bit of research before I came to this conclusion, using it for electric guitar in two of the smaller clubs in New York City. I've got to tell you, it is a thrill in itself to realize that you are no longer shackled to an amp by the formerly ever-present line cord. You never fully realize the clumsiness of that wire until you experience the freedom a wireless system affords you.

At one point at one of my gigs, I walked off the bandstand, playing directly to the people sitting at the tables, and then walked past the bar crowd — playing all the while — until I finally wound up playing an instrumental break on the sidewalk of Second Avenue while I watched the rest of my band through the front window of the club! And all of this was accomplished with no interference of any kind. The Samson SR-2 Receiver, paired with the Samson ST-2/G Instrument Belt Pack Transmitter, had my guitar ringing loud and clear the whole time.

The SR-2 Receiver is an extremely portable high band (VHF) receiver that is powered by either Samson's AC300R 12 volt adapter or an external 12 volt battery supply. This allows the SR-2 to be used in situations where total portability and independence are important; such as in video applications. A single channel, crystal-controlled type, the SR-2 system utilizes dbx noise reduction. The frequency response is 30 Hz to 18 kHz, and the audio output level is -20 dbm at typical volume, adjustable to +40 dbm maximum. The signal-to-noise ratio is greater than 100 db and the total harmonic distortion is less than .5%.

The ST-2/G Instrument Belt Pack Transmitter is powered by a 9 volt battery which lasts six to eight hours (and who wants to play a gig longer than that?). The radio frequency power output is 50 milliwatts into 50 ohms and the frequency response is 30 Hz to 16 kHz +/- 30 db. Operating range is 250 feet under negative radio frequency conditions.

The Belt Pack Transmitter weighs about three-quarters of a pound (350 grams, to be exact), making it an extremely lightweight item. The receiver weighs approximately the same and both are small enough to fit comfortably into almost any guitar case.

If you are looking for an effective, transportable, affordable means of going wireless, then the Samson Stage II VHF Wireless System definitely deserves your strong consideration.

JERRY WEXLER

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to go, and Phil made it work by having a tremendous amount of lines going at once. The key was to realize that you couldn't just make any kind of sound; you had to have a known overtone with its own resonance and limitations. Even with Phil, you have to have the substructure to make it work.

TMP: *What can you tell me about your role in finding the talent? Everybody at Atlantic seemed to play the dual role of whatever their job was plus A&R person.*

WEXLER: I don't call that A&R. I don't know what A&R is anymore. A great record producer, Ralph Bass, called it 'finding the bodies.' That's the prime function in the record business because if you find the right body, somehow the record will get made. You know, today all the kudos go to the record producers. I think that's arrant bullshit. I mean, Seymour Stein — they should give him the earth for finding Madonna and the Talking Heads and all those other people. I think the credit should go to the people who found Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and Hank Williams, Ray Charles and Bob Dylan; those people are the ones that deserve the awards. That's why John Hammond stands above everybody else. Look at the enormous amount of talent he found.

TMP: *Did you ever reach a point when mixing down things like "In The Midnight Hour" when you said to yourself, 'Well, that's it. This is never going to get old'?*

WEXLER: No, never. I never said that. I always thought maybe a record would sell, maybe it wouldn't, but as far as thinking in terms of a timeless masterpiece for the ages, never. I mean, you got more excited about some records than others, but that's only a question of degree.

One of the records that turned me on instantly, not a record I made but a master that was cut in Muscle Shoals, was "When A Man Loves A Woman," Percy Sledge. I got superexcited when that came in. I called Ahmet in Europe and said, 'Man, you won't believe this.'

TMP: *One last question: How did you go from being someone whose primary experience with music had been as a fan to someone who could assess a performer's talent and produce them?*

WEXLER: Well, okay. There's some background in that I was a record collector, a devout record collector. I used to hang out at the Commodore record shop and I used to make the local music scene on 52nd Street, down in the Village, in Harlem, after hours and so on. And I always had a band of record collector friends who were into the same thing. For example, Milt Gabler, who managed Benny Goodman, had a very good jazz place down in SoHo and would hold these little seminars to educate the people who were hanging out at the time. He really was a focal point for what was happening at that time.

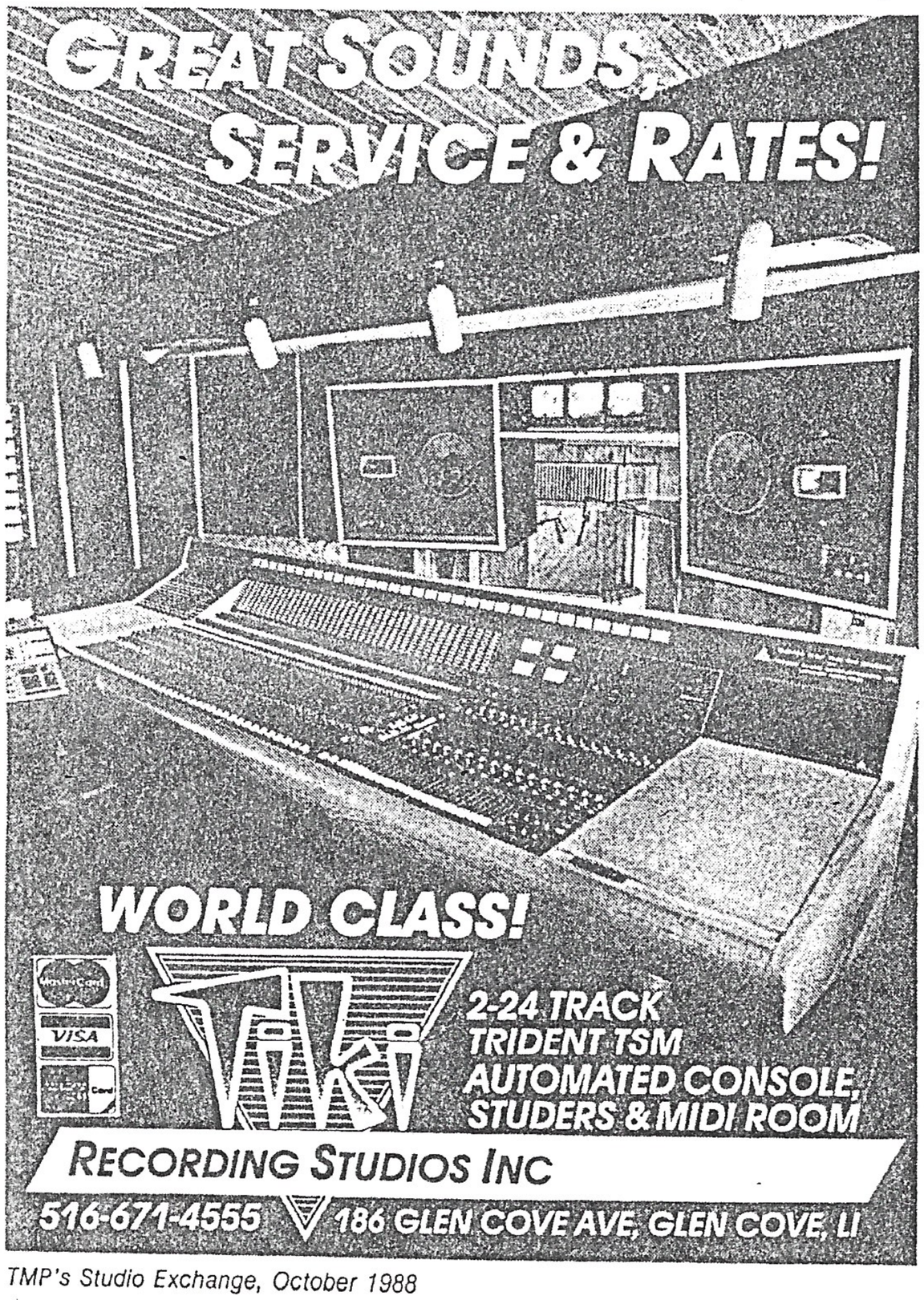
We would collect records — which is not the same as going over to Sam Goody's or Tower Records with their stacks and stacks of records. In those days you really had to search — Salvation Army stores, places that had 'Mad Dog' signs in the window — you'd have to yell through the crack of the door, 'I'm the record guy' — so the grounding was tremendously motivated.

You also tended to specialize in those days, defining for yourself what the focus was, where your area of interest was, and that had to be undiscriminating.

So what were the abilities or the traits that allowed me to produce records? Well, a lot of kids today, let's say, are into heavy metal or punk or hardcore the way that I was into rhythm and blues in the forties. That doesn't necessarily mean, even with all the passion they bring to it, that they could operate the machinery. You have to be able to identify that spark, that variety, records that will catch on, that will sell, to identify who will be. . .the next Beatles, you know, the next Otis Redding. It still takes somebody at the other end of it to isolate and define those qualities that go into a record that will sell. People say, 'Hey, I knew that hit was a hit the minute it came on the radio,' as though that was a qualification for being part of the team that makes the record. It's absurd. By the time that song got on to the radio and that person heard that record, it had gone through a very long process of simplification, weeding out, discriminating and then of doing whatever it took to put it together.

What I'm doing is defining your question, not answering it. I don't know what the answer is, except that I can tell you this: In those days, the early fifties, people were coming to pop with their own ideas and sensibilities independent of the record companies. That's pretty much what we're talking about here.

Somebody once asked me to what did I attribute my success at Atlantic Records. Was it management? No. Was it this thing or that thing? No. Well then, what were the qualities? Well, the qualities were taste, probity and intelligence. That's a mighty big brag, right?

TMP: *Right. (Laughter)*

WEXLER: But, as Dizzy Dean once said, if you can do it, it's not bragging.